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## **Merchant Identities, Trading Nodes, and Globalisation: Introduction to the Special Issue<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The contributors to this Special Issue are concerned by the nature of transregional Asian interactions taking place in the field of commerce. They explore this concern through an examination of the experiences, activities, and histories of commodity traders whose life trajectories criss-cross Asia. The articles share a common geographic point of reference: Yiwu - an officially designated 'international trade city' located in China's eastern Zhejiang province. The introduction to the Special Issue analytically locates the individual papers in relationship to a long-standing body of work in anthropology and history on port cities and trading nodes. In so doing it suggests the importance of considering multiple historical processes to understanding Yiwu and its position in China and the world today, as well as, more generally, for the anthropology of 'globalisation from below'.

Keywords: Yiwu; trading nodes; port cities; trading networks; China; One Belt, One Road

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## Introduction

This Special Issue is concerned by the nature of contemporary transregional Asian interactions taking place in the field of commerce. It discusses the experiences, activities, and histories of commodity traders whose life trajectories criss-cross Asia and harbour in China. The contributors build on the idea of 'globalisation from below' that encompasses the small-scale operations, informal economy, ethnic and diasporic networks and international migrants. By reflecting historically on the nature of 'globalisation from below' and the identities it fosters, the articles bring greater recognition to the older and more recent histories of the communities, networks and individuals active in long-distance trade. In this way, they also bring attention to how such actors may often belong to specific communities and networks that have played a role in connecting different parts of Asia to one another over a period of time that stretches well beyond the era of neo-liberalism. Exploring 'globalisation from below' from a historical perspective highlights the analytical value of recognising the varying and intersecting levels at which historical processes are visible in the routes, practices and strategies of the 'low-end' globalization. Such an endeavour is important because it problematizes assumptions that legality and volume are always the most helpful concepts through which to compare and understand different types of commercial activity.

The diverse lives of merchants or commodity traders investigated in this Special Issue all share a geographic reference point: Yiwu - an officially designated 'international trade city' and (known as) 'China's small commodities city' located in China's eastern Zhejiang province. The city (home to about 2 million inhabitants) attracts merchants the world over to its gigantic Futian market complex. The Futian market houses about 70,000 shops that are conduits for the wholesale of approximately 1.7 million varieties of what are officially classified by the Chinese authorities as 'small commodities'. The concentration of shops and showrooms selling such commodities has turned Yiwu into a popular destination for entrepreneurial migrants from across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The city is international therefore not only in terms of the countries with which it trades (the Russian Federation, the United States of America, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan being its major trading partners according to official statistics). Yiwu's internationality also arises as a result of the settled traders who have made it a home, and transient population who visit the city frequently: amongst the most visible communities of foreign traders are those from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Columbia and the former USSR.

What does a study that focuses on a recently established trade city and the rich assortment of international traders who operate out of it stand to offer to scholarship on the interface of anthropology and history? The fact that the backdrop for studying 'globalisation from below' is Yiwu – a city of modern hotels, shiny super-malls and integrated ports and customs facilities – rather than the historic neighbourhoods and crumbling warehouses of a city on the ancient 'Silk Road' sheds especially vivid light upon the relationship between newer and older forms of inter-Asian connectivity. There are two major reasons, then, why it is helpful to explore Yiwu through the twin lenses of anthropology and history. Firstly, the city offers a grounded perspective on the forms of regional connectivity that are increasingly represented in scholarship and popular discourses in relationship to China's 'One Belt, One Road' policy initiative. In the immediate aftermath of China's policy announcement in 2015, there has been a surge of interest in Asian trading routes and hubs: scholars across a range of disciplines have analysed the historical genealogy of images of 'the Silk Road', both in terms of the importance of these to European colonial powers (Sidaway and Woon 2017:9; cf. Chin 2013), as well as to the changing cultural imaginaries of Asian nation-states (cf. Green 2015). New trade routes and recent political developments have powerfully challenged orientalist narratives that habitually highlighted the peripherality of the region vis-à-vis Europe

and the West. The Silk Roads have re-emerged as being at the centre of global affairs and at the crossroads of civilisation (cf. Frankopan 2015).

The Belt and Road policy initiative has however arisen against the backdrop of cities in China (such as Yiwu) that became hubs of transregional trading activities and communities in the years that followed China's economic liberalisation. As Huaichuan Rui explores in detail in her article in this Special Issue, Yiwu rose to prominence as a trading node for foreign merchants from the early 1990s, making use of, and expanding, transport infrastructure built under the planned economy. Other Chinese cities have also seen the emergence of markets that foreign merchants visit to purchase wholesale commodities for export such as those in Guangzhou, Wenzhou and Beijing. Yet the scale of Yiwu's Futian market gives it a reputation as the world's 'stock town' (Ruiz-Stovel 2010: 51), ensuring that the city's trade is of central significance to its social and economic dynamics. As Rui also documents, however, questions hang over Yiwu's future. There is pressure from the central government to shift the basis of China's exports from the type of affordable commodities purveyed in Yiwu to high quality goods. Policy makers are also concerned by the ongoing importance of 'informal' financial transactions to Yiwu's trading relations with the world. Finally, policy initiatives launched by local and national authorities (such as a growing emphasis on E-commerce) suggest that the trading practices associated with Yiwu's foreign traders are regarded by officials as outdated and unsustainable. Yiwu thus occupies an important place in the modern history of 'the Silk Road' but it is also undergoing significant transformation as a result of the Belt and Road initiative. Now is a uniquely important moment to analyse the city's transformations through time and its role in wider, global processes.

A second way in which scholarship on the interface of anthropology and history stands to benefit from a detailed treatment of Yiwu and its traders arises from the ways in which they illuminate important historical aspects of 'globalisation'. It is tempting to treat Yiwu and comparable settings within the framework of 'translocality' (Appadurai 2005) or, alternatively, as a significant 'stop' along people's many and diverse transnational routes (cf. Sinatti 2009: 63). Such approaches, however, dwell on routes that are produced by recent forms of globalisation and the expressions of neo-liberal capitalism with which they are entwined. However, while for many Chinese Yiwu is thought of as an embodiment of the somewhat romanticised 'Zhejiang spirit' with its grass-roots capitalism (Ruiz-Stovel 2010: 50; 52-53), the contributions to this Special Issue suggest that Yiwu can also be seen as an historic place that is a source of belonging and identity-making for the diverse groups who live in and visit the city.

Analysing the city from a perspective that treats globalisation as a one-dimensional product of economic liberalisation would suggest that Yiwu has few if any insights to offer about understanding historic forms of commerce, mobility, and trade. A great deal has indeed been written in recent years on the opening of China's economy from the mid-1980s onwards, and the effects that this has had on its people and their livelihoods.<sup>2</sup> An extensive body of work also exists on the new markets for Chinese goods that arose in the context of structural readjustment, economic globalisation and the emergence of neoliberal forms of economy.<sup>3</sup> More recently, social scientists have also turned their attention towards the experiences of international migrants (often from 'the Global South') in Chinese cities. Many such migrants initially moved to China as foreign students and in connection with their trading activities, often conducted at a very small scale (Mathews 2011; Gilles 2015). (And Yiwu on par with global cities such as Beijing and Shanghai also has its own specialised office for

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent overview of this body of literature see Westad 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009, Kaminski and Mitra 2012, Kovacs 2015.

foreigners, e.g. Pieke 2014). Ethnographic studies of migrants to China has therefore been pivotal in the emergence of a body of literature that focuses on 'globalization from below' (Mathews et al. 2013). This term is now widely used to distinguish high-end globalisation and its transnational corporations from the 'transnational flow of people and goods' that involves 'relatively small amounts of capital and informal often semi-legal or illegal transactions' (Matthews and Alba Vega 2013: 1).

The contributors to this Special Issue build on these important insights but also emphasise the analytical value of recognising the varying and intersecting levels at which historical processes are also visible in 'globalisation from below'. The collective findings of scholars involved in the project on which the articles in this Special Issue are based demonstrate, indeed, that rarely can the skills people display in the field of commerce be simplistically thought of in terms of either a manifestation of neoliberal entrepreneurialism or as the responses of peripheral economic actors to formal expressions of economic globalisation. Such skills are often conceived of by traders themselves as being embedded in the historical experiences of the communities, networks and settings within which they have emerged. With the aim of bringing greater attention to the historical context that has informed the activities, identities and ideologies of traders, the individual papers dissect the multidimensional types of social relationships, economic practices, trading networks and routes that Yiwu hosts; they also assess the role that the city, and those who live and work there, have played in stimulating, sustaining and nourishing these.

In the Introduction to the Special Issue we contextualise the studies of particular trading groups and networks active in Yiwu that follow in relationship to scholarly work on the historical dynamics of trade, trading nodes (especially port cities), routes and trading diasporas/networks. By doing so, we aim to move beyond approaches that romanticise the commercial dynamic of settings such as Yiwu as the remnants of historical Silk Road cultures, as well as those that suggest comparisons across historical periods have little to offer in the understanding of apparently hyper-modern commercial cities. In this way we emphasise the value that historically grounded studies of trading communities and trading nodes have for understanding the global economy as well as the geopolitical and social imaginations it stimulates today.

### **Trading Nodes in Anthropology and History**

Trading cities have for long captured the imagination of historians and anthropologists, who have deployed such contexts in order to think about critical aspects of culture and society. One theme to emerge from these works concerns the insights that trading nodes offer into the relationship between centre and periphery. Ibn Khaldun – the 14th century North African historian considered by many as being an early exponent of anthropological theory – in his approach to the study of the Arab world, distinguished between urban centres of trade and learning and their rural, tribal hinterlands. For Khaldun, these two types of setting were involved in a cyclical relationship with one another. As our opening remarks suggest, Yiwu's status as a central node of China's international export economy is itself in a state of transition: pressure within China to 'upgrade' product quality, regulate financial transactions, and promote the development of 'smart cities' suggests that from the perspective of policy-makers and the state, Yiwu may increasingly appear as a hard-to-govern hinterland as opposed to a commercial node of central importance to economic planning and urban development.

The analysis of trading nodes has also played a central role in anthropological debates about social and cultural heterogeneity, and its relationship to the economy and state power. Furnival's (1948; cf. Bayly 2003) notion of the 'plural society' thus arose from a consideration of Rangoon in Burma and

the role that colonial forms of political economy played in the emergence of the ethno-linguistically diverse city. Many studies built on Furnival and analysed how in port cities such as Malacca and Singapore plural societies emerged at the intersection of urban life and colonial political economy (cf. Barth 1983). More recently, anthropologists working in established and historic trading cities – ranging from Odessa on the Black Sea to Marseille and Thessaloniki on the Mediterranean as well as ports on the shores of the Western Indian Ocean – have found such settings compelling sites for sharpening theoretical understanding of ‘cosmopolitanism’ (e.g. Simpson and Kresse 2007; Stroux 2008; Grant 2010; Green 2016; Humphrey 2012; Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012; Marsden 2017b). Fewer studies have explored the patterns of sociality and mobility that define distinctly modern commercial nodes. Such contexts tend to be considered by anthropologists as important for the insights that they reveal into new configurations of politics and economics fashioned in the era of globalization. It is, however, analytically productive to compare the social-economic dynamics of Yiwu to work by anthropologists and historians on historic trading centres.

Scholars have shown how the historic dynamics of urban centres and cultural models of ‘working together’ that are of significance to long-distance commercial relations reveal much about the long-term fortunes of the multiple polities within which such centres are embedded.<sup>4</sup> Similarly to the present-day notion of translocality and its disassociation from the nation-state’s sovereignty (Appadurai 2003), from the perspective of the polity and its ruling elites, trading centres are frequently regarded in highly ambiguous terms. Trading nodes bring capital that enables the strengthening, expansion and extension of state power but they are also widely regarded by political elites as dangerous sites of interaction between the subjects of multiple polities and jurisdictional orders, thereby often making them testing grounds for stringent forms of policing and control. Port cities enjoying privileges as free ports (*porto franco*) and arenas of vibrant cultural exchange are particularly liable to such tensions.

The vexed relationship of centres of political power, on the one hand, and commerce, on the other, frequently threatens to undermine the latter’s established and recognised position in the fluid worlds of mobile merchants. Historians have documented these processes in the context of many different polities, ranging from peripheral yet resource-rich fiefdoms (e.g. Audrey Burton 1993) to the great intra-imperial trading centres that played a role in the making and breaking of the fortunes of large swathes of the global economy (Green 2011). The maritime port city has, moreover, offered scholars unique insights into the nature of the wider processes within which such sites are embedded. Green has undertaken an ambitious comparative analysis of Bombay and Barcelona with the aim of assessing how far it is empirically helpful to talk of their being distinct Indian Ocean and Mediterranean ‘worlds’ (Green 2013). On the basis of a comparative analysis, Green argues that significant commonalities between them point to the emergence of a global political economy rather than distinct Oceanic worlds.

It has, of course, not only been colonial and imperial elites who have recognised the possibility that maritime trading ports offer for apparently unregulated forms of political, religious, economic, and social life. Trading centres are widely vilified but also romanticised as ‘ungoverned spaces’ in which various groups – from mafias and criminal gangs to religious movements and sexual dissidents – go about their business in a more open fashion than in self-styled centres of power and learning. This aspect of life in trading nodes has meant that such settings occupy an important place in the cultural imaginations of many societies. Isaac Babel’s (2016) short stories about pre-Soviet Odessa’s Jewish

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Aslanian (2014) on the significance of New Julfa and the Armenian community there for the fortunes of Safavid Iran. Russian

quarter offer a case in point. In more recent times, Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* have sought to capture the dynamic and globally connected environments of trading centres and hubs, focusing on intimate depictions of peaks and troughs in the fortunes of merchants, labourers, seafarers, and officials whose lives are intricately interwoven. It is important to remember however that these forms of mixing and cosmopolitanism have often been short lived – as is illustrated in the pogroms of Jews in Odessa in 1904 (Caroline Humphrey 2012; cf. Grant 2011). Analytically, anthropologists have thus deployed the term 'post-cosmopolitan' to bring attention to the fact that against the imprint of urban violence the city's 'core' inhabitants and international trading communities often continue to emphasise their purported openness to, and tolerance of, cultural difference (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2014; Skvirskaja 2014; Marsden 2017b). The literature in both history and anthropology attests then to the fragile nature of cosmopolitanism in places where people deal with heterogeneity as a matter of fact (see e.g. also Driessen 2005 and Gekas 2009 on Mediterranean port-cities). Indeed, in the face of histories of conflict and violence, what is striking is the historic durability of images of cosmopolitan openness in shaping the identities of people living in such settings, and the ways in which such settings are themselves viewed as sites of mixing by the outside world.

How far if at all is it helpful to compare a modern commercial centre such as Yiwu with historic trading node? Much does make Yiwu a categorically different type of city from maritime port cities such as Odessa, Marseille and Bombay: far from rising to commercial prominence as a result of its ability to benefit from imperial frontiers, for example, Yiwu appears at first sight to be squarely positioned within the Chinese nation-state. Moreover, while the city is officially a 'port city' – Yiwu was listed as a dry port city during the 69th session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in 2013 – it is an in-land or 'dry port' rather than maritime trading hub.

Yet, treating Yiwu only as a modern-day logistical centre (cf. Pliez 2015) rather than a historic trading node, narrows the analytical possibilities that ethnographic work in this type of setting raises. The articles in this Special Issue collectively document that it is the multiple histories that international traders bring to Yiwu that shape the kind of node the city is; and that there is therefore a cultural and emotional life to Yiwu that is not captured by characterisations of the city as a 'capitalist supermarket'. The articles also show that the economic activities that have contributed to Yiwu's prominence can only be understood in relation to geopolitical shifts and tensions in the world over the past thirty years.

Moreover, as several contributions demonstrate (see especially Anderson and Ibanez Tirado), many merchants, far from seeing Yiwu as an enormous supermarket (à la Augé's (1992) 'nonplace'), are conscious that their own biographies (past and to an extent future), particular histories and tastes are intertwined with the city's development and are integral to the practices and politics of 'place-making'. Put differently, various (national) communities of traders comprise mobile 'partial societies' (cf. Ho 2017) that are essential for Yiwu's social reproduction. It is thus commonplace to hear foreign merchants in Yiwu (both visitors and residents) remarking that they and the city or its enterprises have 'grown up together'; and that the city owes its development to their (and other foreigners') presence and activities.

For many foreign visitors, 'trade' occupies only one side of their activities in Yiwu. The number of restaurants and cafes in the city, not to mention several large 'foot massage parlours' and night clubs, underscore the extent to which Yiwu is a site of leisure and tourism as well as commerce. Indeed, many who visit Yiwu treat the city as a node in international touristic circuits: for a few Russians, the city might be the first and only experience of China; an Afghan based in Odessa might



travel on from Yiwu to the southern Chinese island of Sanya for a beach holiday; Syrians travel to Malaysia for English-language courses, while 'Bukharans' located in the Arabian Peninsula combine a trip to Yiwu with taking their family members for health checks in India. In this way, Yiwu's foreign visitors entertain a conception of the city as an internationally connected urban milieu that is shaped and reshaped in relation to specific cultural tastes and trajectories.

In light of the tendency for anthropologists to focus on established and historic trading centres rather than explore more ephemeral, small-scale, and rapidly shifting trading nodes, analysing Yiwu in relationship to historical literature on commercial centres raises several comparative lines of inquiry. Diana Ibanez Tirado (this volume) brings attention to the ways in which groups of traders from Central Asia in Yiwu position themselves in relationship to other groups active in the city. Ibanez Tirado shows how these traders argue that commerce is a part of their culture and upbringing – this marks them off from newcomers to trade who are merely the beneficiaries of corrupt regimes and have little or no appreciation of the skills associated with trade. The Uzbek traders from the Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan with whom Ibanez Tirado spent time in Yiwu reside in an area of the city (Changchun) in which individuals from different communities that have long interacted with one another in Sino-Eurasian trade (Uighurs, Siberian Russians, Kazakhs and Uzbeks) tend to be based. This points to the spatial relocation of historic social relationships associated with commerce away from China's Central Asia frontier to the modern setting of the Yiwu International trade city. If the characterisation of Yiwu as a logistics hub appears to reflect the city's modern development, this way of approaching Yiwu and those who work in the city also looks far too simplistic from the point of view of the international traders who are based there.

### **Beyond Globalisation: Historicising Trading Communities, Groups and Networks**

There is a notable discrepancy in the countries that statistics record as being the principal destination for commodities purchased in Yiwu (i.e. the Russian Federation, the USA, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan), and the backgrounds of Yiwu's settled and transient population of traders (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Columbia). This discrepancy reveals two aspects of Yiwu's relationship with the wider world. First, traders operating from the city specialise in the transportation of commodities across national boundaries after having exported them out of China. Second, Yiwu is a home to substantial international communities from regions of the world that have been characterised by political violence and instability over the past decades. As Anderson and Marsden's contributions show, Yiwu's Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Afghans and also Ukrainians in no simple sense seek 'refuge' in Yiwu.

If trading nodes have long held an appeal to anthropologists, the same can also be said of the long-distance trading community, network, or group. While anthropologists are frequently taken to task for having produced overly bounded conceptions of 'traditional society' during the heyday of the discipline's foundational period, there were, in fact, excellent and nuanced studies of communities that engaged in long-distance trade (e.g. Cohen 1971, Hill 1966). More recently, the anthropology of the post-Soviet world has brought attention to the activities of traders and entrepreneurs from Kiev to Buryatia. Such traders operate at a great many scales – from suitcase to container – and have re-entered worlds of commerce, mobility and exchange after a substantial period of disconnect that resulted from the Soviet Union's command economy (e.g. Humphrey 2002; forthcoming).

Another key thematic focus of the Special Issue concerns, then, the importance of historicising the nature and activities of long-distance merchants and trading networks. On the one hand, there has been a rising interest among anthropologists in the role played by particular groups in long-distance trade. Yet there has been a tendency to emphasise the importance of cultural factors in explaining

the success or otherwise of these groups, at the expense of analysing how a specific interplay of historical factors has shaped such processes (e.g. Werbner 1999). An analysis of the specific historical trajectories of trading communities and networks, as well as concomitant ideologies and the nodes that have been important to their activities, as several contributions in this volume suggest, reveal a great deal about the role they have played in forging various forms of transregional connectivity. On the other hand, the contributions also explore the wider implications for anthropological theory of working with the type of mobile, dynamic, and geographically diverse groups and individuals who are a visible feature of life in Yiwu.

Building on Ho's notion of 'mobile society' (Ho 2017; cf. Cheuk 2015; Markovits 2000, 2003), Marsden's chapters explores the working of history at various levels in his study of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigré merchants who connect Yiwu to Saudi Arabia. This trading community is associated historically with the activities of mobile Bukharan traders in China, India and Russia, especially between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. More saliently, however, Marsden also traces the international commercial activities of traders identifying themselves with this group over the past fifty years. The case study brings recognition to the extent to which trading networks operating in Yiwu are often not simply a phenomenon that arose in the context of China's decision to enter the World Trade Organisation, but rather complex social formations established over years if not decades of commercial activity.

Historians have sought to identify and define different types of long-distance trading communities. Curtin's study stimulated a great deal of work on the importance of diasporas formed as result of political flight in the emergence of long-distance trade (Curtin 1983). Recently, Curtin's work has been challenged by historians who suggest that he under-emphasised the role played by commercial motive in the development of long-distance trading networks and communities (e.g. Aslanian 2014). Indeed, by placing conceptual emphasis on displacement from an authentic 'homeland', the notion of 'diaspora' makes recognition of the inherently partial and geographically distributed nature of 'mobile societies' harder to grasp. Historians have, in turn, debated the extent to which such communities of cross-cultural traders can be thought of as 'middleman' minorities (Bonacich 1973): for some, this term captures the extent to which the skills of such groups were required to act as the go-betweens of various powerholders; other scholars have suggested that this approach undermines the role played by trading networks in shaping their own economic spheres (e.g. Marsden 2016b).

A further area of debate within this body of scholarship concerns the relationship of trading communities to political processes. Treating trading networks as merely the go-betweens of holders of power and authority has often led to the assumption of their inherently apolitical position. This perspective has been questioned by the work of historians who have shown that diasporic traders were active participants in the societies in which they worked (Subrahmanyam 1992) and that the very thesis of 'the apolitical trader' is itself based on a narrow definition of 'the political'. In particular there has been a move away from exploring how far trading networks depending on influencing or accommodating themselves to state power to asking how such groups and individuals arbitrated between different political, linguistic and cultural orders (Herzog 2016). Historical work on trading networks and diasporas in the British Empire of the nineteenth-century is increasingly recognising the important if informal diplomatic positions that these actors occupied, often for the multiple empires of which they were the subjects (Brophy 2016; Alavi 2015; Ahmed 2017; Yolacan forthcoming). By contrast, in the Russian Empire, imperial subjects who did not belong to well-established, well-reputed or preferentially treated trading networks or diasporas (e.g. Germans) were often excluded from high profile political life and treated as suspect by authorities, even if they

actively participated in local politics, and also conservatively endorsed the political positions of Russia's imperial authorities.<sup>5</sup>

A consideration of the political participation of trading communities highlights how inadequately the historical legacy of long-distance trading networks is captured if thought of in relationship to the economic domain alone. Indeed, scholarship increasingly recognises that what is interesting about mobile merchants and their networks is not necessarily their distinction from settled communities. Rather, trading networks helped to produce individuals who rose to significance at historical junctures in which many people were on-the move, be in the form of migrants, refugees, traders, scholars, or sojourners (Meyer 2014: 5). It is also important, in short, to take into account the influence of mobile trading groups on other mobile and migrant communities sharing similar arenas of travel.

These mobile and migrant communities, and the settings in which they thrive, appear especially visible and vibrant not only at the geographical frontiers of different realms but also on the temporal frontiers of different historical eras. As Sood (2016) has explored in his discussion of an Islamic Eurasian arena of exchange in the eighteenth century, such temporal frontiers often constitute 'pivotal moments in history' that brim with 'unscripted possibilities' and bridge 'multiple transitions' between different kinds of capitalism, governance, and globalisation (Sood 2016: 12).

Anthropologists and historians have documented the emergence of commercial practices and networks in the temporal frontier that marks the collapse of the Soviet Union and the gradual incorporation of its successor states into the world international state system (e.g. Karrar 2016, 2013; Mostowlansky 2017). There is growing recognition that such commercial structures did not merely arise to the surface during the period of postsocialist 'transition' (Kandiyoti 1999; Humphrey 2002): they have also become increasingly rigid features of the political and economic environment themselves. As several articles in this Special issue attest (see Anderson, Marsden, Skvirskaja), the influence that some individuals and business, which arose in these circumstances, now hold raises questions about the range of practices, temporalities and ideologies that the notion of 'globalisation from below' is able to capture fully. Skvirskaja, for instance, discusses Russian traders operating in China and focuses on the transformation of a 'typical', individual actor of 'globalisation from below' – a post-Soviet transnational 'suitcase trader' (chelnok) – into a corporation with headquarters in Russia and Yiwu. While a culture of mistrust continues to dominate Russians' operations in Yiwu and undermines the development of Russian traders' wide-spread encompassing commercial networks, it also encourages new forms of commercial organisation. The case study of a major Russian wholesale business dealing in small commodities furthermore illustrates how innovative practices rely on ideological conformity with the patriotic traditionalist agenda of Putin's Russia. They do so by 'bridging' a historical rupture between the ethics of the conservative pre-Soviet Russian merchant and the post-Soviet trader as well as producing a continuous ideological space between Russia and China via the Corporation's mobile founder-trader and manpower.

Paul Anderson's contribution, in turn, concerns the activities of Syrian merchants from the city of Aleppo in Yiwu. On the one hand, Anderson points to the importance that ruptures in the global economy have played in the global extension of Syrian trading networks, showing how the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in new markets for Syrian traders in Central Asia and Russia. The availability of Chinese credit in the post global crisis environment of 2009 made possible Aleppo's emergence as a wholesale hub for both a post-Soviet and a trans-Asian Islamic ecumene, and a node for the re-export of Chinese commodities. In this sense, an understanding of the importance of Yiwu

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of trade and merchants in imperial Russia, see Monahan 2015.

to Syria requires contextualisation in geopolitical processes that have unfolded in West Asia over the course of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the activities of these Syrian merchants has also been effected in major ways by the military conflict in Syria, contributing to the rise of a new type of trader able to trade between China and Syria and, moreover, move between warring parties in Syria in the context of ongoing violence.

How far are the legacies of such groups – in realms ranging from trade and economy to politics, identity and subjectivity – and the oft remarkable individuals they threw up best thought of as marking the end of one era and the emergence of a new one? Alternatively, do the activities and thinking of such commercial groups and individuals hold insights into better understanding the shape of things to come? These are questions that are especially prescient in today's context as geopolitical dynamics increasingly focus on the tensions and shifting boundaries that demarcate the 'zones of influence' of the 'great powers' along the new Silk Roads. As the contributions to this Special Issue seek to show, trading nodes such as Yiwu offer a unique vantage point for both looking back over transformations in the interconnected nature of the global economy, and theorising the implications these are likely to have for future generations of people who are part of, or effected by, long-distance networks as well as the nodes in which these coalesce.

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